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SUBJECT: DIYALA VISIT HIGHLIGHTS PROGRESS OF IDP RETURNS INITIATIVE

[¶1.](#) (SBU) Summary: A January 24 visit to Diyala province demonstrated that a GOI-led initiative to create conditions for return is reaching returnee populations and appears to be having a positive effect on populations that are considering coming back. The Government of Iraq (GOI) is enthusiastic about the initiative and clearly eager to take credit for work funded by international actors, but GOI investments were lagging. The visit provided an opportunity for monitoring and evaluation of work and we will seek to follow up to assess whether returns are sustainable and the shelter selection process is inclusive. The initiative is assisting the return of displaced persons and can serve as a model for coordination, but the GOI needs to live up to its commitments to invest, other international organizations must contribute more and development actors should begin to tie in programming to support sustainability. End Summary.

[¶2.](#) (SBU) Sr. Refugee and IDP Coordinator traveled to Diyala province with a 12-person delegation, including officers from USAID's Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA), the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the World Food Program, the Food and Agriculture Organization, UNICEF, the International Organization for Migration, and the World Health Organization. Our goals were to: 1) check on progress of the initiative; 2) encourage UN agency heads to support the initiative; and 3) spur greater engagement by local and national officials. Although Diyala province is the source of just 19% of Iraq's displaced, it has seen 28% of all refugee and IDP returns in 2009 - over 58,000 - second only to Baghdad.

[¶3.](#) (SBU) The day began with a meeting/press conference in the provincial capital of Baquba with the Governor of Diyala Dr. Abd-al-Nasr al-Munstir Billah, the head of the Implementation and Follow Up Committee on National Reconciliation (IFCNR) Mohammad Salman, and a range of other Baghdad and Diyala officials. On the way to the meeting, Salman's convoy encountered an attack with an improvised explosive device with no injuries, and thereafter traveled with heavy police reinforcements.

[¶4.](#) (SBU) GOI officials expressed their commitment to the initiative, with Salman noting that the GOI committed 50 billion dinar (\$43 million, 1000 dinar = \$0.87) to compensation for destroyed housing, adding that the Prime Minister had approved a proposal for another \$100 million for reconstruction. (Note and Comment: Salman, who is running for Parliament representing Diyala, may be engaging in election year promises. Of 50 billion dinar for compensation that was approved in 2008, only 13 billion was spent, and the Treasury reclaimed the unspent money. We are still waiting the GOI to transfer to the province an additional 37 billion dinar the GOI has pledged. End note and comment.) Salman praised the initiative, noting the "exceptional efforts" of the international partners and the "an unprecedented amount of attention and funding" the GOI is giving to the initiative. "People are coming back because they know what is happening in Diyala," he said. "We hope our cooperation will continue."

[¶5.](#) (SBU) Sr. RefCoord and each of the UN agencies described their

activities in Iraq and expressed their commitment to the initiative. UNHCR and IOM provided details on efforts specific to Diyala. (Comment: Notably, WFP, which has not implemented programs under the initiative, stated that although it is concerned with the return of internally displaced persons (IDPs) and refugees, it is concerned with all of the vulnerable. It has, however, forwarded to RefCoord a proposal to assist with the initiative, saying more cannot be done unless more funding comes its way. End comment.)

¶6. (SBU) In two villages in Baqubah district, Saide Awad and Abu Sear/Khafaja, the delegation observed wide-spread destruction caused by sectarian and Coalition fighting of 2006 and 2007. Amid the new, ochre-colored UNHCR homes were completely flattened buildings, massive piles of rubble, and homes with crumbling roofs where occupants had made makeshift repairs in order to live. In both villages, residents reported that they had returned in the last few days because of the homes constructed by UNHCR. Villagers that had returned prior to the shelter project noted that both Shi'a and Sunni residents were living together as they had before the violence. Both villages currently have mixed populations. Several families indicated that other displaced family members wanted to return since the initiative commenced, but that more housing, and better water supply were urgently needed. (Note: Specific monitoring comments follow. End Note).

Returns, Rubble and Reconstruction

¶7. (SBU) In Abu Sear/Khafaja, a village that is majority Shi'a, a farmer interviewed by Assistance RefCoord recounted his story. In 2006, a group of militants had arrived demanding that villagers

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assist them or leave the village, when villagers did not depart, the militants killed more than a dozen of the residents. At that point the residents departed en masse, returning later, after the violence, to find the homes of those who did not cooperate completely destroyed. Other residents noted that Coalition Forces had conducted air strikes against the village after they had left that also added to destruction. The resident pointed to a large pile of brick rubble that had been his home. He noted that only three of his family members had returned, because the home that UNHCR had built was too small to accompany all eight of his family members.

Monitoring Comments: Beneficiary Selection Critical

¶8. (SBU) Interviews with residents and other demonstrated that continuous monitoring of the initiative is needed. The following have been raised with UNCHR as key elements of that follow up:

-- IDPs are returning to the villages benefiting from shelter reconstruction in Diyala. However, according to returnees, many of those who wish to return cannot yet because shelters were provided to those who had already returned. There will need to be second and third rounds of construction in order to benefit everyone in need. Homes should also be spaced further apart, to allow families to build onto their homes.

-- Beneficiary selection needs to be clarified and implemented more assiduously to target most the vulnerable. Assistance RefCoord and USAID interviewed women who said that a group of seven female-headed households had been promised housing but had not received it. It is possible that a beneficiary selection committee, composed of UNHCR's local representative, the local mayor (mukhtar), village leaders, the district council and the NGO selected by UNHCR to carry out the work, did not include female representatives. It remains unclear to Post what criteria were used to select beneficiaries.

-- Quality of construction is much improved over a previous visit to Diyala, with houses showing higher quality masonry and more professional finishing. UNHCR will henceforth increase the size of the homes to 40 sq. meters (from about 25 square meters), adding a second room to accommodate larger families. It has done this at a

cost of approximately \$1400, so that homes now cost \$8,400. However, UNCHR should ensure that home design allows walls to be demolished to accommodate extra rooms without destabilizing the structure, as per the concept that owners will be able to expand these UNHCR "starter" homes.

-- Better oversight of contractors is required to ensure requirements are met. For example, UNHCR's construction specifications require that housing latrines be connected to leach fields. These fields did not appear to exist in both locations.

-- Critical needs remain to be met if returns are to be sustainable. Priority needs include access to water (both drinking water and water for irrigation), education (especially for girls), health care and livelihoods. None of the homes inspected had access to potable water, though they had been fitted with water tanks and piping. The vast majority of residents are farmers and many irrigation systems need repair (Comment: These issues are not specific to IDPs. End Comment.) IOM has interviewed more than 60 villagers with a view to providing grants for specific business plans. IOM reports grants will be provided shortly.

Follow On Actions: Commitment Still Needed
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19. (SBU) All told, the work being done by the initiative in Diyala is almost entirely by UNHCR to date, using funds the U.S. has provided. Though Muhammad Salman and his Diyala Initiative point-man, Aqil Salman, were mobbed by welcoming residents when they arrived at these villages, in reality GOI commitments have lagged, and we have yet to get confirmation that funds committed to the initiative have arrived. The GOI needs to step up their engagement and there are simple actions it could take, and which Post will suggest. The Diyala government could direct its public works agencies to clear away the heavier remnants of destroyed housing, for example, or deploy some of those provided with IDP six-month contract jobs to clear the rubble. We note that Directors General of line ministries in the province often are unresponsive to the governor, adding to implementation difficulties. It could also use some of these individuals to clear and repair damaged irrigation canals. Wider UN agency commitment is needed. Comments by other agencies -- particularly UNICEF, which has done some water projects in the area, WFP, and WHO -- indicate they will henceforth be more engaged.

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Comment
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110. (SBU) Post leaves this trip encouraged by what is taking place in Diyala but recognizing that sustainability will require improved planning and a greater commitment on behalf of the GOI and the UN. In time this approach could serve as a model with some applicability elsewhere in the country. For the time being it appears that the initiative is serving U.S. humanitarian, moral and strategic interests in Diyala by reaching vulnerable populations, assisting returnee populations and supporting reconciliation of Shi'a and Sunni groups. To be sure, our monitoring has revealed a range of issues that require immediate follow up. Other assistance by the GOI and other UN agencies is necessary to ensure returns are sustainable and that the shelter selection process includes both female-headed households and follow on returnees. GOI commitment and capacity also remains key and, frankly, a limiting factor. We aim to take these lessons to heart as we look elsewhere in Iraq to support safe, sustainable and voluntary returns. End Comment.

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